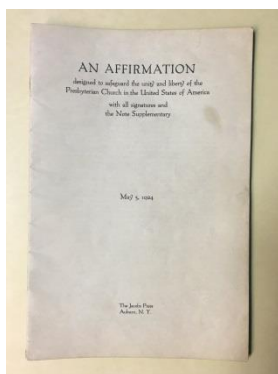


**The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary,  
Columbia University in the City of New York**

Union Theological Seminary Archives 1

Finding Aid for

**Robert Hastings Nichols, 1876-1946**



The Auburn Affirmation of 1924 [early printing], UTS1: Robert Hastings Nicholas Papers, 1876-1946, Series 1A, box 1, f 5, the Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Finding Aid prepared by: Rebecca Nieto, October 2016 with financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation

**Summary Information**

Creator: Robert Hastings Nichols, 1873-1955  
Title: Robert Hastings Nichols Papers  
Inclusive dates: 1876-1946  
Bulk dates: 1923-1925  
Abstract: Graduate of Yale Univ. and Auburn Theological Seminary; Church history scholar, Presbyterian Minister and Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. (P.C.U.S.A.) member responsible for spearheading the Auburn Affirmation of 1924, a culmination of the Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy in the Presbyterian Church. Materials consist of textual materials relating to Auburn Affirmation, research files, published sermons and articles by Nichols and others.  
Size: 12 boxes, 5.75 linear feet  
Storage: **Offsite storage**  
Repository: The Burke Library  
Union Theological Seminary  
3041 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  
Email: [burkespecial@library.columbia.edu](mailto:burkespecial@library.columbia.edu)

**Administrative Information**

- Provenance:** The Nichols papers form part of the Union Theological Seminary Archives, which comprises institutional and administrative records of the Seminary, combined with the papers of many organizations, scholars, pastors, laypersons, and others connected with the school. This collection was among of a large group of unprocessed material that was organized in 2016 during an archival processing project funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.
- Access:** Archival papers are available to registered readers for consultation by appointment only. Please contact archives staff by email to [burkespecial@library.columbia.edu](mailto:burkespecial@library.columbia.edu), or by postal mail to The Burke Library address on page 1, as far in advance as possible. [Burke Library staff](#) is available for inquiries or to request a consultation on archival or special collections research.
- Access Restrictions:** The collection is unrestricted to readers. Certain materials, however, are in a fragile condition, and this may necessitate restriction in handling and copying.  
Please note that boxes are held in Offsite storage and will require 48 hours' notice in response to a weekday request for retrieval.
- Preferred Citation:** Item Description, UTS: Robert Hastings Nichols Papers, series #, box #, and folder #, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

**Biography**

Robert Hastings Nichols was born in Rochester, New York on October 2, 1873. He was educated at Yale University in 1894, going on to earn his Ph.D. also from Yale by 1896, followed by studies at Auburn Theological Seminary between 1898-1899, and much later receiving a Doctorate of Divinity from George Washington University in 1921. He also attended Mansfield College and Oxford University (1899-1900), and was ordained in the Presbytery of Binghamton on October 11, 1901.

Nichols had an extensive teaching career, early on as a master of the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania (1896-1898) before beginning a long-term career at Auburn Theological Seminary, first as assistant professor of church history from 1910-1913, then as professor of Church History from 1913-1944, and finally as professor emeritus from 1944 to 1955. Other than teaching at Auburn, Nichols also taught as Auburn Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary from 1939-1944 (later professor emeritus from 1944-1955), and lecture in Church History at Union from 1944-1948.

Nichols also served the Presbyterian Churches at Unadilla, New York from 1901-1902 and South Orange, New Jersey from 1902-1910, and was a stated clerk with the Synod of New York

from 1922 to 1951. These longstanding accomplishments in teaching and preaching would bolster Nichols' contributions to the Auburn Affirmation and other progressive activities within the Presbyterian Church.

Nichols is perhaps most noteworthy for his involvement in helming the Conference Committee that organized between 1923 and 1925 to challenge the General Assembly, the highest governing body of the Presbyterian Church at that time. Nichols, his colleague Henry Sloane Coffin, and upwards of 150 so-called "liberal ministers" took issue with the five essential truths implemented by the General Assemblies of 1910 and 1916. The five fundamental truths -- 1) the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, 2) the inerrancy of scripture 3) Christ's miracles, 4) substitutionary atonement through his death, and 5) bodily resurrection -- had to be upheld by any prospective Presbyterian minister seeking ordination. These orthodox mandates were at the center of the Fundamentalist-Modernist conflict in the Presbyterian Church, in which so-called "liberal ministers" such as Nichols sought to interrupt by calling for modified practices that permitted theologians to think and preach (within broad limits) as they wish.

The Auburn Affirmation - named after Nichols' affiliation with that seminary - is significant in the breadth of support it garnered, but also in that it emerged at a moment of intense friction between more traditional, ecclesiological-minded Presbyterians, and the burgeoning sects of liberal Presbyterians who practiced inquisitive methods of interpreting scripture and the work they did in their communities. The committee would eventually collect upwards of 1270 signatures and letters of support from leaders and elders from presbyteries around the country, as well as considerable ire and debate among differently-minded P.C.U.S.A. members.

Nichols' engagements in both the Ecclesiastical Committee and on the Committee on Protestant Liberties in the Presbyterian Church (of which he was secretary) are evident in the materials gathered here. Also among Nichols' papers are correspondence, press clippings, research notes and off-prints centered on the Fundamentalist-Modernist conflict in the 1920s-1930s, also dabbling in other subjects of interest to Nichols such as Princeton and Union theological seminaries, the Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Baptist churches, and various materials on heresy trials of the period including Charles Augustus Briggs, Harry Emerson Fosdick, John Scopes, and more.

Following a longstanding career based in New York, Robert Hastings Nichols passed away in New York City on July 18, 1955.

### **Collection Scope and Content Note**

The collection is organized in [number of] series:

- **Series 1: The Auburn Affirmation, 1923-1939 (4 boxes, 2.75 linear foot)**

This series consists of administrative records related to the Auburn Affirmation as well as

signatures and correspondence from the original signers of the document. Series 1 is thus divided between the Committee on Ecclesiastical Statement and Affirmation Signatures and Commentary. Materials consist exclusively of textual materials, with correspondence kept in their original alphabetical order, with distinctions between correspondence between individuals and clergies affirming the document and those refusing to sign or asking their names be removed from it.

- **Subseries A: Committee on Ecclesiastical Statement, 1923-1925**

This subseries consists of correspondence sent and received between Nichols and other committee members leading up to the 1925 General Assembly. Materials found here consist chiefly of correspondence with Presbyterian elders and affiliate organizations such as the Committee on Protestant Liberties in the Presbyterian Church, as well as Affirmation-related correspondence with the press, periodical publications such as the Presbyterian Advance. Notable correspondents include James E. Clarke, Henry Sloane Coffin, and Murray G. Howland.

- **Subseries B: Affirmation Signatures and Commentary, 1923-1924**

This subseries includes note cards, letters and telegram materials submitted by members of the P.C.U.S.A. in supporting the 1925 Auburn Affirmation, arranged alphabetically. Also included are signatures removed or not submitted for final publication, press (off-print, articles, clippings, and ephemera) concerning the Affirmation and its reception, and James E. Clarke's "Brief History of the Affirmation/Overture to the Affirmation".

**Series 2: Committee on Protestant Liberties in the Presbyterian Church, 1923-1946 (3 boxes, 1.5 lin. ft.)**

This series consists of administrative reports, meeting agendas and minutes, contact information, correspondence and other business records collected by Nichols during his time as Secretary of the Committee on Protestant Liberties in the Presbyterian Church. There is crossover at times with the conference committee Nichols also led (see Series 1A: Committee on Ecclesiastical Statement), such as address lists and requests for P.C.U.S.A. affiliation status among its membership. Records found here also extend beyond the original publication of the Auburn Affirmation and reflect protests and other movements as part of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict, such as the Protest Against the Action of the 1927 General Assembly (Series 2, box 1, folders 13/14), and the proposed union of the P.C.U.S.A. and the United Presbyterian Church in 1932. Box 2 includes committee correspondence arranged in alphabetical order, sent among several individuals and often from chair members of the committee such as Nichols, Murray S. Howland, and Philip Smead Bird.

**Series 3: Research and Writings, 1876-1928 (5 boxes, 2.5 lin. ft.)**

This series consists of research files kept by Nichols and reflecting his wide-ranging interests around Presbyterian fundamentalism and the related rise of progressive Presbyterianism. Materials consist chiefly of clippings, magazine articles and offprints, and other published materials that is annotated in some places. Materials here are arranged first by materials relating explicitly to the Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict, then in loose alphabetical order by subject such as “Baptist Churches in Texas” or “Licensure of Ministers in the Presbyterian Church”, followed by “Heresy Trials in the Presbyterian Church”, with ample coverage on the Briggs case of 1892, the Harry Emerson Fosdick and John Scopes trials. Also found here are offprints of articles and sermons collected by Nichols, including two pieces authored by Nichols: a report on social reform in the New York City Mission Monthly (Series 3, box 4, folder 7) and an article entitled “Fundamentalism in the Presbyterian Church” from 1925 (Series 3, box 4, folder 20). This series also consists of three books and a number of legacy signature cards or library call cards as they were originally included with the collection.

### **Processing**

Metal clips and staples were removed from materials and folded items were flattened. Materials were placed in new acid-free folders and boxes. Acidic items were separated from one another by interleaving with acid-free paper as needed.

### **Further Sources**

Additional correspondence covering Nichols’ time at Auburn Theological Seminary can be found in the [Auburn Theological Seminary Records](#), Subseries 1D: Administrative Office Subject Files, 1875-1978, under subheading “R.H. Nichols Correspondence”, which consists of letters between 1909 and 1940.

Additional biographical information on Robert Hastings Nichols is available in the Alumni Directory of Union Theological Seminary 1836-1958, accessible online through [CLIO](#).

Nichols’ book “The Growth of the Christian Church” takes up many of the issues he witnessed and engaged with in his faith work within the Presbyterian Church. The second volume of that text, published by Westminster Press in 1914, is discoverable on the [Internet Archive](#). Additional digitized materials on Nichols, his works and writings can be found in the digital collections at Princeton Theological Seminary.

## Contents list

### Series 1: Auburn Affirmation, 1923-1939

#### Subseries 1A: Committee on Ecclesiastical Statement, 1923-1925

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
1A	1	1	Report on the Committee of Ecclesiastical Statement [with revisions by H.S. Coffin], 1924
1A	1	2	Correspondence and Notes, 1923-1924
			<b>Alphabetical Correspondence</b>
1A	1	3	Correspondence -- Alphabetical A-B, 1924
1A	1	4	CA-CH, 1923-1924
1A	1	5-7	James E. Clarke, 1923-1924
1A	1	8	Clarke-Clough, 1923
1A	1	9	Henry Sloane Coffin, 1923-1924
1A	1	10	Cornuelle-G, 1923-1924
1A	1	11	Hallett-Howard, 1923-1924
1A	1	12-14	Murray G. Howland, 1923-1924
1A	1	15	I-L, 1923-1924
1A	1	16	M, 1923-1924
1A	1	17	N-W, 1923-1924
			<b>Further Correspondence</b>
1A	1	18	Presbyterian Elders - Correspondence and Signatures, 1924
1A	1	19	List of Elders Signing Memorial to General Assembly, 1923-1924
1A	1	20	Correspondence with Presbyterian Elders [alphabetical] - A-C, 1924
1A	1	21	D-G, 1924
1A	2	1	Correspondence with Presbyterian Elders -- G-L, 1924
1A	2	2	M-N, 1923-1924
1A	2	3	P-S, 1924-1925
1A	2	4	T-Z, 1924
1A	2	5	Letters requesting names be removed from Affirmation I, 1924
1A	2	6	ibid. II, 1924
1A	2	7-11	Letters Refusing to Sign Auburn Affirmation, 1924
1A	2	12-14	Requests for Copies of the Affirmation, 1924
1A	2	15	Requests for Correct Addresses, 1924
1A	2	16	Affirmation-related Correspondence with Persons of other Denominations, 1924
1A	2	17	Affirmation-related Publication Correspondence, 1924
1A	2	18	Auburn Affirmation -- Legal Questions, 1923-1925
1A	2	19	Undated Committee Correspondence [192?]

**Series 1: Auburn Affirmation, 1923-1939****Subseries 1B: Affirmation Signatures and Commentary, 1923-1939**

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
1B	1	1-3	Signatures of Presbyteries and Related Correspondence, 1924
1B	1	4	Signatures -- A, 1923-1924
1B	1	5	B, 1923-1924
1B	1	6	C, 1923-1924
1B	1	7	D-E, 1923-1924
1B	1	8	F, 1923-1924
1B	1	9	G, 1923-1924
1B	1	10	H, 1923-1924
1B	1	11	I-J, 1923-1924
1B	1	12	K-L, 1923-1924
1B	1	13	M-O, 1923-1924
1B	1	14	P-R, 1923-1924
1B	2	1	S, 1923-1924
1B	2	2	T-Z, 1923-1924
1B	2	3	Unpublished Signatures, 1924
1B	2	4	Press, Commentary and Criticism, 1923-1924
1B	2	5	Affirmation Commentary - Leaflets, 1936
1B	2	6	Off Prints and Supplements, 1924-1939
1B	2	7	James E. Clarke's Brief History of the Affirmation/Overture to the Affirmation, Undated

**Series 2: Committee on Protestant Liberties in the Presbyterian Church, 1923-1946**

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
2	1	1	Committee Expense Reports and Finances I, 1924-1925
2	1	2-4	Correspondence- Finances, 1923-1931
2	1	5	Meeting Minutes, 1924-1926
2	1	6	Reports and Minutes - Proposed Change in form of Government, 1925-1929
2	1	7	Membership, 1928-1929
2	1	8	Requests for Correct Addresses and Church Connection, 1924
2	1	9	Ministers Invited to Attend, 192?
2	1	10	Presbytery Address List [by state], 192?
2	1	11	Materials for Pamphlets, 1924-1935
2	1	12	Licensure Candidacy Cases, 1923-1936
2	1	13-14	Protest Against the Action of the 1927 General Assembly - Drafts, 1925-1928
2	1	15	Proposed Union Between P.C.U.S.A. and United Presbyterian Church, 1932
2	1	16	Correspondence Committee, 1924-1925

**Series 2: Committee on Protestant Liberties in the Presbyterian Church, 1923-1946**

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
2	1	17	General Correspondence, 1925-1932
2	1	18-19	Correspondence related to Presbyterian Advance [publication] [1930-1935]

**Committee Correspondence - Alphabetical**

2	2	1	A, 1925
2	2	2	Ba-BI, 1924-1928
2	2	3	BI-Bz, 1924-1932
2	2	4	Ca-Ch, 1924-1925
2	2	5-13	John Brittan Clarke/A.S. Clarke, 1925
2	2	14	Co-Cf, 1924-1932
2	2	15	CoG-G, 1924-1935
2	2	16	H-Heath, 1924-1932
2	3	1	Jesse Hermann, 1925-1927
2	3	2	Hi-, 1924-1925
2	3	3	Hodges-Hopkins, 1924
2	3	4-6	Murray Howland, 1924
2	3	7	Hu-, 1925
2	3	8	I-J, 1925-1928
2	3	9	K, 1924-1934
2	3	10	L, 1924-1925
2	3	11	M-McCl, 1920-1930
2	3	12	MacColl-, 1924-1926
2	3	13	MacCormick-Mclvor, 1924-1925
2	3	14	Mackie-Merrill, 1925-1933
2	3	15	Milner-Moffatt, 1924-1925
2	3	16	John J. Moment, 1924-1932
2	3	17	Mont-Mz, 1924-1932
2	3	18	N-R, 1924-1927
2	3	19	S, 1925-1934
2	3	20	T-V, 1924-1927
2	3	21	W-Z, 1924-1946

**Series 3: Research and Writings, 1876-1934**

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
			<b>The Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict</b>
3	1	1	Writings/Cases on Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in NY Presbytery, 1900-1925
3	1	2	Press Clippings and Correspondence, 1923-1940



**Series 3: Research and Writings, 1876-1934**

Series	Box	Folder	Contents
3	1	3-4	Writings/Cases on Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in New York Presbytery, 1923-1925
3	1	5	Harry Emerson Fosdick and the New York Presbytery, 1915-1924
3	1	6	Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict in Pennsylvania Presbyteries, 1923-1925
3	1	7	Pamphlets on Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, 1903-1925
3	1	8	Clippings/Magazine Articles relating to F.-M., 1923-1925
3	1	9	Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in Baptist Church, 1924-1925
3	1	10	Presbyterian Advance Articles on Early Years of Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, 1911
3	1	11-12	Articles on Fundamentalism, 1922-1925
3	1	13	Articles on Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict, 1914-1924
3	1	14	Articles on Modernism, 1924
3	1	15	Ephemera on Doctrinal Issues Facing the Presbyterian Church, 1924
3	1	16	Walter D. Buchanan Trial and Related Matters in F.-M. Conflict, 1924-1925
3	1	17	Publications/Articles on Proposed Union between Presbyterian Church and the United Presbyterian Church, 1926-1934
			<b>Research - by Subject</b>
3	2	1	Baptist Churches in Texas - Article on Fundamentalist Leader Repudiated [Undated]
3	2	2-3	Episcopal Church/Anglican Communion, 1908-1924
3	2	4	Evolution, 1924-1926
3	2	5	Commission on the Church and Social Service - Federal Council of Churches, 1912
3	2	6	General Assembly Correspondence and Notes, 1923-1925
3	2	7	Kikuyu Conference, 1914-1915
3	2	8	Licensure of Ministers in the Presbyterian Church, Undated
3	2	9	Presbyterian Church and Social Action, 1935-1936
3	2	10	Princeton Seminary, 1927-1928
3	2	11	Princeton Seminary and Doctrinal Orientation of its Program, 1928-1929
3	2	12	Roman Catholic Church, 1928-1931
3	2	13	United Free Church of Scotland, 1924
			<b>Research - Heresy Trials in the Presbyterian Church</b>
3	2	14	Materials on various Heresy Trials, 1883-1922
3	3	1-4	The Presbyterian Church vs. Charles A. Briggs, 1891-1892
3	3	5	UTS Faculty Statement on Briggs Case, 1891
3	3	6	Defense of Charles A. Briggs, 1891-1892

**Series 3: Research and Writings, 1876-1934**

<b>Series</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>	<b>Contents</b>
3	3	7	New York Observer Article on Briggs Case, 1892
3	3	8	Articles on Heresy Against William Adams Brown, 1911-1912
3	3	9	Harry Emerson Fosdick, Walter Buchanan and the First Presbyterian Church [1923]
3	3	10	Harry Emerson Fosdick vs. New York First Presbyterian Church, 1923-1924
3	3	11	John Scopes Trial, 1926
<b>Articles</b>			
3	4	1-2	Charles Briggs Inaugural Programs, 1876-1891
3	4	3	Irish Presbyterianism by Thomas Croskery [inscribed to Briggs], 1884
3	4	4	Union Theological Seminary and the Church of Christ, 1908-1915
3	4	5	The Seminary and the Church by William Adams Brown, 1913
3	4	6	The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Present Task of the Church by Cleland Boyd McAfee, 1913
3	4	7	Report by R.H. Nichols on Social Reform in NYC Mission Monthly, 1914
3	4	8	The Practical Aims of a Liberal Evangelism by Henry Sloane Coffin at UTS, 1915
3	4	9	On the Value of Church History by John Alfred Faulkner, 1920
3	4	10	Present Day Problems in the Light of Church History by George W. Richards, 1921
3	4	11	The Coming Reformation by James Gordon Gilkey, 1923
3	4	12	The Virgin Birth by William M. Curry, 1923
3	4	13	The Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy by William Horace Day and Sherwood Eddy, 1924
3	4	14	Modernism and the Virgin Birth of Christ by Shirley C. Hughson, 1924
3	4	15	Articles by and on Justin Wroe Nixon, 1924-1925
3	4	16	Creed Subscription in the Presbyterian Church by James E. Clarke and Related Materials, 1925-1927
3	4	17	Editorial from the Presbyterian Advance, 1925
3	4	18	What Presbyterians Are Standing For by Henry Sloane Coffin, 1925
3	4	19	Articles by J. Gresham Machen, 1925
3	4	20	Fundamentalism in the Presbyterian Church by R.H. Nichols, 1925
3	4	21	Miscellaneous Lectures and Addresses, 1925-1926
3	4	22	The Bible Crusaders, 1926
3	4	23	The Establishment of Religion by Blewett Lee, 1927
3	4	24	The Catholic Church and the Modern Mind -- Atlantic Monthly Series, 1928

**Series 3: Research and Writings, 1876-1934**

<b>Series</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>	<b>Contents</b>
3	4	25	Articles on Fundamentalism and Modernism by Alfred Wesley Wishart, Undated
3	4	26	The Church and Social Service by John McDowell [Secretary, Board of Home Missions], Undated
3	4	27	Modernism: A Foe of Good Government by James M. Gray, Undated
3	4	28	Points at Issue Between Fundamentalists and Modernists by James E. Clarke, Undated
3	4	29	The Problem of Christian Creeds as Affected by Modern Thought by A.C. McGiffert, Undated
<b>Sermons</b>			
3	5	1	Sermons preached by Henry Van Dyke, 1892
3	5	2-3	Sermons by Harry Emerson Fosdick, 1922-1925
3	5	4	Sermons by William Pierson Merrill, 1923-1924
3	5	5	Miscellaneous Sermons, 1924-1925
3	5	6	Sermons preached by Henry Sloane Coffin on Intellectual Freedom in the Presbyterian Church, 1924-1925
3	5	7	Sermons by Clarence E. MacCartney, Undated
3	5	8	The Equal Rights of Fundamentalists and Modernists in a Comprehensive Church by Rev. Leighton Parks, Undated
<b>Books</b>			
3	5	9	Edward E. Shepard Case -- Protestant Episcopal Church, 1906
3	5	10	Special Committee to Visit Princeton Theological Seminary/P.C.U.S.A., 1927
3	5	11	Petition Presented to the 140th General Assembly of the P.C.U.S.A., 1928
<b>Signature Cards</b>			
3	5	12	RHN Collection Legacy Signature Cards, Undated